

Sins Estimated by the Light of Heaven

by Edward Payson

To truly understand the nature of sin, we must see it through the eyes of God, in the light of his countenance.

Scripture: Job 42:5, Psalm 90:8, Isaiah 6:5, Matthew 12:36, Hebrews 4:13, Revelation 20:12

Topics: "Sin And Guilt", "Repentance And Holiness"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of recognizing the true nature of our sins in the eyes of God, emphasizing that our sins are far more numerous, aggravated, and criminal than they appear to us. He describes how God's infinite holiness and glory reveal the depth of our iniquities, both open transgressions and secret sins of the heart, urging listeners to view their sins through God's perspective. Payson paints a vivid picture of standing before God's throne, surrounded by angelic beings, and experiencing the overwhelming presence of God's glory, highlighting the need for repentance and self-examination before the final judgment day.

Transcript

Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.--PSALM xc. 8.

It is a well known fact that the appearance of objects, and the ideas which we form of them, are very much affected by the situation in which they are placed in respect to us, and by the light in which they are seen. Objects seen at a distance, for example, appear much smaller than they really are. The same object, viewed through different mediums, will often exhibit very different appearances. A lighted candle, or a star, appears bright during the absence of the sun; but when that luminary returns, their brightness is eclipsed. Since the appearance of objects, and the ideas which we form of them, are thus affected by extraneous circumstances, it follows, that no two persons will form precisely the same ideas of any object, unless they view it in the same light, or are placed with respect to it in the same situation. These remarks have a direct and important bearing upon the intended subject of the present discourse. No person can read the scriptures candidly and attentively, without perceiving, that God and men differ very widely in the opinion which they entertain respecting almost every object. And in nothing do they differ more widely, than in the estimate which they form of man's moral character, and of the malignity and deceit of sin. Nothing can be more evident than the fact, that in the sight of God our sins are incomparably more numerous, aggravated and criminal, than they appear to us. He regards us as deserving of an endless punishment, while we scarcely perceive that we deserve any punishment at all. Now whence arises this difference? The remarks

which have just been made will inform us. God and men view objects through a very different medium, and are placed with respect to them in very different situations. God is present with every object; he views it as near, and therefore sees its real magnitude. But many objects, especially those of a religious nature, are seen by us at a distance, and of course appear to us smaller than they really are. God sees every object in a perfectly clear light; but we see most objects dimly and indistinctly. In fine, God sees all objects just as they are; but we see them through a deceitful medium, which ignorance, prejudice and self-love place between them and us.

Apply these remarks to the case before us. The Psalmist, addressing God, says, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance." That is, our iniquities or open transgressions, and our secret sins, the sins of our hearts, are placed, as it were, full before God's face, immediately under his eye; and he sees them in the pure, clear, all-disclosing light of his own holiness and glory. Now if we would see our sins as they appear to him, that is, as they really are, if we would see their number, blackness and criminality, and the malignity and desert of every sin, we must place ourselves, as nearly as is possible, in his situation, and look at sin, as it were, through his eyes. We must place ourselves and our sins in the centre of that circle, which is irradiated by the light of his countenance, where all his infinite perfections are clearly displayed, where his awful majesty is seen, where his concentrated glories blaze, and burn, and dazzle, with insufferable brightness. And in order to this, we must, in thought, leave our dark and sinful world, where God is unseen and almost forgotten, and where consequently, the evil of sinning against him cannot be fully perceived,--and mount up to heaven, the peculiar habitation of his holiness and glory, where he does not, as here, conceal himself behind the veil of his works, and of second causes, but shines forth the unveiled God, and is seen as he is.

Let us follow the path by which our blessed Savior ascended to heaven, and soar upward to the great capital of the universe, to the palace, and the throne of its greater King. As we rise, the earth fades away from our view; now we leave worlds, and suns, and systems behind us. Now we reach the utmost limits of creation; now the last star disappears, and no ray of created light is seen. But a new light now begins to dawn and brighten upon us. It is the light of heaven, which pours in a flood of glory from its wide-open gates, spreading continual meridian day, far and wide through the regions of ethereal space.

Passing swiftly onward through this flood of day, the songs of heaven begin to burst upon your ears, and voices of celestial sweetness, yet loud as the sound of many waters, and of mighty thunderings, are heard, exclaiming, "Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Blessing, and glory, and honor, and power, be unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever." A moment more, and you have passed the gates; you are in the midst of the city, you are before the eternal throne, you are in the immediate presence of God and all his glories are blazing around you like a consuming fire.

Flesh and blood cannot support it; your bodies dissolve into their original dust, but your immortal souls remain, and stand naked spirits before the great Father of spirits. Nor in losing their tenements of clay, have they lost the powers of perception. No; they are now all eye, all ear, nor can you close the eyelids of the soul, to shut out for a moment, the dazzling, overpowering splendors which surround you, and which appear like light condensed, like glory which may be felt.

You see indeed, no form or shape; and yet your whole souls perceive, with intuitive clearness and certainty, the immediate, awe-inspiring presence of Jehovah. You see no countenance; and yet you feel as if a countenance of awful majesty, in which all the perfections of divinity shone forth, were beaming upon you wherever you turn. You see no eye; and yet a piercing, heart-searching eye, an eye of

omniscient purity, every glance of which goes through your souls like a flash of lightning, seems to look upon you from every point of surrounding space.

You feel as if enveloped in an atmosphere, or plunged in an ocean of existence, intelligence, perfection and glory; an ocean, of which your laboring minds can take in only a drop; an ocean, the depth of which you cannot fathom, and the breadth of which you can never fully explore. But while you feel utterly unable to comprehend this infinite Being, your views of him, so far as they extend, are perfectly clear and distinct. You have the most vivid perceptions, the most deeply graven impressions, of an infinite, eternal, spotless mind, in which the images of all things, past, present, and to come, are most harmoniously seen, arranged in the most perfect order, and defined with the nicest accuracy: of a mind, which wills with infinite ease, but whose volitions are attended by a power omnipotent and irresistible, and which sows worlds, suns and systems through the fields of space with far more facility, than the husbandman scatters his seed upon the earth;--of a mind, whence have flowed all the streams, which ever watered any part of the universe with life, intelligence, holiness, or happiness, and which is still full, overflowing and inexhaustible.

You perceive also, with equal clearness and certainty, that this infinite, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, all-wise, all-creating mind is perfectly and essentially holy, a pure flame of holiness, and that as such, he regards sin with unutterable, irreconcilable detestation and abhorrence. With a voice which reverberates through the wide expanse of his dominions, you hear him saying, as the Sovereign and Legislator of the universe, Be ye holy; for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

And you see his throne surrounded, you see heaven filled by those only, who perfectly obey this command. You see thousands of thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand of angels and archangels, pure, exalted, glorious intelligences, who reflect his perfect image, burn like flames of fire with zeal for his glory, and seem to be so many concentrations of wisdom, knowledge, holiness and love; a fit retinue for the thrice holy Lord of hosts, whose holiness and all-filling glory they unceasingly proclaim.

And now, my hearers, if you are willing to see your sins in their true colors; if you would rightly estimate their number magnitude and criminality, bring them into the hallowed place, where nothing is seen but the whiteness of unsullied purity, and the splendors of uncreated glory; where the sun itself would appear only as a dark spot, and there, in the midst of this circle of seraphic intelligences, with the infinite God pouring all the light of his countenance round you, review your lives, contemplate your offences, and see how they appear. Recollect that the God, in whose presence you are, is the Being who forbids sin, the Being of whose eternal law sin is the transgression, and against whom every sin is committed. Keeping this in mind, let us,

I. Bring forward what the Psalmist, in our text, calls our iniquities, that is, our more gross and open sins, and see how they appear in the light of God's countenance. Have any of you been guilty of impious, profane, passionate, or indecent, corrupting language? How does such language sound in heaven? in the ears of angels, in the ears of that God, who gave us our tongues for noble purposes? Bring forward all the language of this kind which you have ever uttered; see it written as in a book; and while you read it, remember that the eye of God is reading it at the same time. Then say, Is this fit language for an immortal being to utter? Is this fit language for God to hear? Especially, let every one inquire whether he has ever violated the third commandment, by using the name of God in a profane or irreverent manner. If he has, let him bring forward his transgressions of this kind, and see how they appear in the light of God's presence. Sinner, this is the Being, whose adorable name thou hast profaned, and who, bending upon thee a look of awful displeasure, says, I will not hold him guiltless, that taketh my name in vain. O, what an

aspect of shocking, heaven-daring impiety, does this assume, when viewed in this situation! Have any of you been guilty of uttering what is untrue? If so, bring forward all the falsehoods, all the deceitful expressions, which you have ever uttered, and see how they appear in the presence of the God of truth; of that God, who has declared, that he abhors a lying tongue, and that all liars shall have their portion in the burning lake. O, what is it to stand convicted of falsehood before such a God as this! Have any of you been guilty, either at home or in foreign countries, of perjury or false swearing? If so, you may here see the awful Being, whom you mocked, by calling him to witness the truth of a known, deliberate lie. And how, think you, such conduct appears in his eyes? How does it now appear in your own!? When you took that false oath; when you said, so may God help me as I speak the truth, you did, in effect, utter a prayer that his vengeance might fall upon you, if what you swore was untrue. And will not God take you at your word? Will not that vengeance, which you imprecated, fall upon you? O, be assured that it will, unless deep, timely repentance and faith in Christ prevent. Nor is the guilt of those, who share in the gain of perjury, and permit such as are employed by them to make use of it, much less black and aggravated in the estimation of him, whose judgment is according to truth.

Have any of you transgressed the command which says, Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy? Such transgressions, I am aware, appear very trivial on earth; but do they appear so to him who gave this command? Do they appear so in heaven, where an everlasting Sabbath is observed? Let those, who have been guilty of such transgressions, hear a voice from the glory around them, saying, I, to whom you are indebted for all your time, allowed you six days for the performance of your necessary labors, and reserved but one for myself, but one to be employed exclusively in worshipping me, and in working out your own salvation. But even this one day you denied me; when spent in my service, you considered it as a weariness, and therefore employed it, either wholly or in part, in serving yourselves; thus proving yourselves to be wholly unqualified and

unfit to enjoy an endless Sabbath in my presence.

Have any of you--we must propose the unpleasant question been guilty of violating the command which forbids adultery and its kindred vices? If so, bring forward these abominations, and see how they look in heaven, in the presence of the holy angels, in the sight of that thrice Holy God, who has said, I will come near and be a swift witness against the adulterers, and they shall have their portion in the lake of fire.

Have any of you been guilty of fraud, injustice, or dishonesty? Have you in your possession any portion of another's property, without the owner's consent fairly obtained? If so, bring forward your dishonest gains; hold out the hands which are polluted by them, and see how they look in heaven, in the presence of that God, who has said, Let no man overreach or defraud his brother in any matter; for the Lord is the avenger of all such.

Have any of you been guilty of intemperance? If so, let such look at themselves, and see how a drunkard, a rational being, self-degraded to a level with the beasts and wallowing in the mire of his own pollution, appears in heaven, in the society of pure angelic spirits, in the sight of that God, who endued him with intellectual powers, and thus capacitated him for being raised to an equality with the angels.

While attending to the preceding remarks, probably many, perhaps most of my hearers may have felt as if they were not personally concerned in them, as if they were guilty of none of these gross iniquities. I would indeed hope, that of some of them at least, none of you are guilty. But these are by no means the only iniquities, of which God takes notice; for our text further informs us, that he has set secret sins, the sins of

our hearts, in the light of his countenance. Let us then,

II. Bring our hearts into heaven, and there, laying them open to view, see how they will appear in that world of unclouded light, and unsullied purity.

And, O, how do they appear! What a disclosure is made, when, with the dissecting knife of a spiritual anatomist, we lay open the ~uman heart, with all its dark recesses, and intricate windings, and expose the lurking abominations, which it conceals, not to the light of day, but to the light of heaven! My hearers, even in this sinful world the spectacle which such a disclosure would exhibit could not be borne. The man, whose heart should thus be laid open to public view, would be banished from society nay, he would himself fly from it, overwhelmed with shame and confusion. Of this every man is sensible, and therefore conceals his heart from all eyes with jealous care. Every man is conscious of many thoughts and feelings, which he would be ashamed to express to his most intimate friend. Even those profligate, abandoned wretches, who glory in foaming out their own shame, and whose mouths, like an open sepulchre, breathe out moral contagion, putrefaction, and death, scarcely dare utter to their own equally abandoned associates every thought and feeling, which rises within them. And if this is the fact, if the heart, laid open to view, would appear thus black in this dark, sinful world; who can describe, or conceive of the blackness which it must exhibit, when surrounded by the dazzling whiteness of heaven, and seen in the light of God's presence, the light of his holiness and glory? How do proud, self-exalting thoughts appear, when viewed in the presence of him, before whom all the nations of the earth are less than nothing and vanity? How do self-will, impatience, and discontent with the allotments of Providence appear, when viewed as exercised before the throne of the infinite, eternal, universal Sovereign? How do angry, envious, revengeful feelings appear in the eyes of the God of love, and in those regions of love, where, since the expulsion of the rebel angels, not one such feeling has ever been exercised? How do wanton, impure thoughts appear--but we cannot pursue the loathsome, sickening enumeration. Surely, if all the evil thoughts and wrong feelings which have passed in countless numbers through either of our hearts, were poured out in heaven, angels would stand aghast at the sight, and all their benevolence would scarcely prevent them from exclaiming in holy indignation, Away with him to the abode of his kindred spirits in the abyss! To the omniscient God alone would the sight not be surprising. He knows, and he alone knows, what is in the heart of man; and what he knows of it he has described in brief, but terribly expressive terms. The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their hearts. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked! Thus our own hearts appear even to us, if we view them in the light of God's countenance, and recollect that in his sight, thoughts and feelings are actions, that a wanton look is adultery, and hatred murder.

III. Having thus viewed our actual sins of heart and life, as they appear in the light of heaven, let us take a similar view of our sins of omission. Should we neglect to do this, we should see but a small part of our sinfulness; for our sins of omission are by far the most numerous, and by no means the least criminal offences, of which we are guilty. But before we proceed to take this view, allow me to remind you once more, where you are, and in whose presence you stand. Recollect all which you have heard and seen of God's infinite perfections; of his unapproachable glory, of the offices which he sustains, of the works which he has performed, of the blessings which he has bestowed upon us, upon our fellow creatures.

Look at him once more, as he appears when seen in the light of heaven; as he appears in the eyes of the angels and archangels around you, and then say what he deserves from his creatures. Does he not deserve, can you avoid perceiving that he deserves, all their admiration, love, reverence, confidence, gratitude and obedience? Does he not, O does he not, deserve to be loved, and feared, and served with all the heart and soul and mind and strength? This, you are sensible, is what his law requires of us; and can

any requisition be more just and reasonable?

Can we refuse to comply 'with it; can we withhold our affections and services from such a being as this, without incurring great and aggravated guilt? Yet this, my fellow sinners, is the being, from whom we have all withheld our affections and services. Our whole lives present one unbroken series of duties neglected, of favors not acknowledged. And, O, how do they appear, when we review them in the light of God's countenance! When we see before us our Creator, our Preserver, our Benefactor, our Sovereign, and our heavenly Father; when we see in him, to whom all these titles belong, infinite excellence, perfection, glory and beauty; when we see with what profound veneration, with what raptures of holy, grateful affection, he is regard and served by all the bright armies of heaven; and then turn and contemplate our past lives, and reflect how they must appear in his sight, can we refrain from exclaiming with Job, We have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now our eyes see thee; wherefore we abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes?

I have sinned; what shall I say unto thee, O thou Preserver of men I Must not each of us say with the Psalmist, Immumerable evils have compassed me about; my iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more in number than the hairs of my head; therefore my heart faileth me! Nay more, when you see what God is, and how he is worshipped in heaven, and then look at the coldness, the formality, the want of reverence, with which you have often approached him in prayer, and listened to his word, must you not feel conscious, that should he call you into judgment, you could not answer for one in a thousand of the iniquities, which have stained your holy things, your religious duties?

But the duties which we owe to God, are not the only duties which we are required, and which we have neglected, to perform. While his law requires us to love him with all the heart, it also requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. And this general command virtually includes a great number of subordinate precepts; precepts, which prescribe the duties of the various relations, that subsist between us and our fellow creatures. And how far have we obeyed these precepts? How far have we performed the duties, which God requires of us, as husbands, as wives, as parents, as children, as masters, as servants, as citizens, and as members of the human family? When we spread our lives before God, and look at them as they appear in the light of his countenance, can we fail to perceive, that we have in all these respects been grossly deficient, that we have left undone many, very many things, which we ought to have done, and that we are far from having discharged the duties of a single relation which we sustain? O, how much more might we have done, than we actually have done, to promote the temporal and eternal happiness of all, with whom we are connected!

Nor do our sins of omission end here. There is another being, whom we are under infinite obligations to love, and praise, and serve with supreme affection. This being is the Lord Jesus Christ, considered as our Redeemer and Savior, who has bought us with his own blood. We are required, and sacredly bound to feel, that we are not our own, but his; to prefer him to every earthly object, to rely upon him with implicit confidence, to live, not to ourselves, but to him, and to honor him even as we honor the Father. Every moment then, in which we neglected to obey these commands, we were guilty of a new sin of omission. Nor have we the smallest excuse for neglecting to obey these commands; for he is most worthy of all which they require. Even the angels, for whom he never died, regard him as worthy to receive every thing, which creatures can give. Much more then may it be expected, that we, for whom he has done and suffered so much, should regard and treat him as worthy. But how grossly have we failed in performing this part of our duty! How must the manner, in which we have treated his beloved Son, appear in the sight of God? How does it appear to us, when we contemplate him as he appears in heaven; when we see the

place which He there fills; when we recollect, that in him all the fullness of the Godhead dwells, and that to him are unceasingly ascribed wisdom, and strength, and blessing, and honor, and glory, and power?

The subject before us is far from being exhausted, and very far from having had justice done to it; but we must leave it, and hasten to a conclusion. Before we close however, permit me to ask, whether you cannot now perceive the reason, why your sins appear more numerous and criminal in the sight of God, than they do in your own? Have you seen or heard nothing, which convinces you, that they are far more numerous and aggravated than you had supposed? If so, you have seen nothing of what has been exhibited; you have, properly speaking, heard nothing, which has been said; you have not seen your sins in the light of God's countenance; for had you seen them in that light, they would have appeared, in some measure, to you, as they appear to God himself.

'Witness, for instance, the effect which a view of God's glory produced upon the prophet Isaiah. Though he was an eminently good man, and had probably fewer sins to answer for than either of us, yet when in vision he saw Jehovah seated upon his eternal throne, and heard the surrounding seraphim exclaiming, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory, he cried out in amazement and consternation, Woe is me; for I am undone; I am a man of unclean lips.

In a similar manner, my hearers, would you have been affected, had you seen even but a glimpse of those glories, which we have vainly attempted to exhibit. Can you not easily conceive that this would have been the case? Can you not conceive, that were you really placed in heaven, before the throne of God, with all the light of his glory shining around you, all the majesty of His countenance beaming upon you, every glance of his omniscient eye piercing your hearts,--your sins would appear to you far more black and numerous, than they now do?

If so, allow me to remind you that a day is approaching, in which you will be constrained to see your sins, as they appear in the light of God's countenance. When that day arrives, his eternal Son, the appointed Judge, will be seen coming in the clouds of heaven with all his Fathers glories blazing around him, and all the bright armies of heaven following in his train. Seated on a throne of resplendent whiteness, with a countenance from the terrors of which the heavens and the earth will flee affrighted, he will summon the whole race of men before him, and there cause their lives to pass in review, expose all their secret sins, lay open the inmost recesses of our hearts; while the flood of pure, celestial light which pours itself around him, will by contrast cause their blackness to appear seven fold more black.

Then all disputes respecting the depravity of mankind, and the demerit of sin, will be ended forever. Then no more complaint of the strictness of God's laws, or of the severity of the punishment, which it denounces upon transgressors, will be heard; for every mouth shall be stopped, and all the world stand guilty before God. But a conviction of sinfulness and guilt will then come too late; for there is no available repentance beyond the grave. He that is found a sinner at the judgment day, will continue a sinner, and be treated as a sinner forever.

O, then, my hearers, be persuaded now to come to the light, that your deeds may be reprov'd, and set in order before you; exercise such feelings respecting them, and so judge yourselves, that you may not be condemn'd of the Lord in that day.

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